



# WHY NOT TAKE CANDY FROM A BABY? (IF HE LETS YOU!)

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## Examines manipulation as part of social life, and the dog's need for clear boundaries & leadership

By Suzanne Clothier

You had to admire the little guy. Not quite three years old, the Cocker - let's call him Buffy - possessed considerable clarity, at least when it came to expressing his wants and needs. It was this same clarity that had gotten him tossed out of several obedience classes. The instructors felt he was "dog aggressive" and were not particularly pleased with Buffy's response to being punished for his behavior. (Growls and snaps are very clear communications, but rarely appreciated by humans for their communication value.)

Buffy and his owner stood in front of the seminar group, one of three dog/handler teams who had reported "dog aggression" problems. There was no doubt that each of three dogs had problems that needed to be worked out. The Boxer to Buffy's left was powerfully exuberant, an "in-your-face" kind of dog though intelligent and friendly. The Golden to the right was a whirling bundle of tail wagging energy that shifted focus in the blink of an eye. And in the center of it all was Buffy, a dog who was going through life determined to get everything he felt was coming to him. And he was unwittingly aided and abetted in this by his loving but inept handler.

For all three dogs, there were two common denominators - a lack of self control which led to the dogs reacting to any and all stimuli, and a lack of clear leadership from their owners. We began work on basic self control. Each handler was instructed to ask the dog to sit quietly, reminding them as necessary if they changed position. In a matter of moments, all three dogs were sitting fairly quietly and beginning to calm down. Soon bored by this exercise, Buffy decided to liven things up by engaging in a staring contest with the Boxer. The Boxer completely ignored him. This appeared to infuriate Buffy who began to escalate his behavior in an attempt to attract the Boxer's attention. I asked Buffy's owner to move him to her right side, away from the Boxer.

At first, Buffy sat quietly in the new position, but quickly became bored once more. Laying down with a sigh, he began watching the Golden to his right. She had problems respecting or even acknowledging boundaries, and soon moved toward Buffy, who responded by charging out to the end of his lead and rather crudely defining "his" space. The Golden retreated. Buffy's owner got him back under control, and a for a brief time, peace reigned while I explained self control basics to the audience.

As I talked, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that the Golden kept wiggling her way over within 5 or so feet of Buffy. Initially, the Cocker charged noisily at the Golden, but as his owner got more proficient at watching for signs of impending rallies, the little dog began refining his technique. He discovered that he didn't need to waste quite so much energy. A simple curl of the lip was sufficient at first, and then the Golden needed nothing more than a hard stare to convince her to back off momentarily. He accomplished all of

this without ever stirring from a down at his owner's side.

Watching Buffy's impressive display of long range communications, I thought about bringing up the issues of leadership with regard to the need for the human leader to set appropriate boundaries. The Golden's owner was just as guilty of not setting boundaries for her dog as Buffy's owner was of letting Buffy set the boundaries. But since my emphasis at that moment was on self-control, I decided to just keep working on that. Obviously, some audience members took that to mean that I was unaware of or unconcerned by what was going on.

Buffy began to experiment with mind control. Initially, he was satisfied if the Golden was at least 8 feet away. Then he began to broaden his sphere of influence, and sent clear signals to back off until the Golden was consistently staying 12 feet away. Then Buffy added a new rule - don't even look in my direction. That worked so nicely, he went for broke, and began insisting that the Golden never look at him AND also that she stay on her handler's right side. And he did it all without moving an inch or making a noise. Like I said, you had to admire the little guy.

Between Buffy's efforts and the Golden's handler finally getting a handle on asking her to sit and remain sitting on a loose lead, we finally had all 3 dogs sitting quietly. (Strangely enough the Boxer whose dramatics had been a cause for alarm among many seminar participants had quickly settled down and ignored all the interactions between the Cocker and the Golden.)

The dogs were calm, but now some members of the audience were visibly upset. When I asked if they had any questions, one woman quite indignantly asked, "Do you know what's going on behind you? Have you seen what that Cocker has been doing?" When I replied that I was well aware of Buffy's activities, she was outraged.

"Well, how would you correct that?" she demanded.

"Correct what?" I asked. "He's been asked to sit quietly on a loose leash, and he's done so. He got tired of sitting - reasonably so - and laid down, which is fair. This isn't a sit stay exercise. He hasn't budged an inch from where he was asked to remain. What would I be correcting him for?"

"He's being manipulative!" She was not amused when I laughed and responded that all social animals are manipulative - it is part and parcel of being a social creature. Within a social setting, no matter what the species, each individual will manipulate others in order to get what they want or need, according to their ranking in the hierarchy and how strong their motivation may be. As the old saying goes, "You can ask for anything. That doesn't mean you'll get it."

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I pointed out that everyone in the room had manipulated others during the course of the seminar in both subtle and not-so subtle ways - choosing a place to sit, making it clear they'd prefer someone with a noisy dog NOT sit right next to them, reaching for the last really good donut, etc. Dog, human, horse, goat - it didn't matter what the species; manipulation was a normal and usually appropriate aspect of social behavior if done with respect for the responses received as a result. I did note that manipulation as a word carried some unpleasant baggage and was generally used in a negative way.

Though she grudgingly agreed that manipulation was part of life as a social animal, I could see that she and I still weren't on the same page. She paused for a moment, frowning at Buffy, and then complained, "But he's so unfair."

That one puzzled me. "Unfair? How is he being unfair?"

"He keeps changing the rules!" she wailed in pure frustration. To her dismay, the image I had of dogs acting in accordance with Robert's Rules of Order undid me. When I stopped laughing, we were able to establish that she - not the Golden - was uncomfortable whenever rules were changed in her own life.

Like any contract, the rules that exist between two individuals are always subject to change. Conflict arises only when the shift in the rules is not equally agreeable to both parties. If all are in agreement, the rules could change every 10 seconds without any problems. I pointed out that while Buffy had his own agenda for what was appropriate behavior from the Golden, and was hell bent on claiming as much territory as possible, the Golden herself didn't really care. She was happy sitting anywhere near her owner, had no desire to conquer the world and so gave in to Buffy's demands. As he expanded the "Golden free zone," she adjusted to each "change of rules" without a murmur.

In dog to dog interactions - just like in our daily lives - certain basic rules are established and rarely, if ever, change though variations on the basic theme may occur. Between social animals, rules are important since there is a real need for predictability in the behavior of others around us. It is surprising, hurtful and sometimes genuinely frightening when people don't act or respond to us according to the "rules."

There is also a need to be able to predict how our own behavior may help us avoid confrontation or be successful - both are hard to do if rules keep changing. Imagine that each time you drove down the street, the powers-that-be had established new rules for driving.

On many subtle levels, we do adjust to changes in the "rules" in our everyday life. Ask any man about the rules for behaving nicely around his wife, then ask him if the rules are any different when she's got a blazing fit of PMS.

There are also variations in "rules" and temporary rules that are purely dependent on a specific situation or a given dog's mood. A puppy who stomps across an older dog's body in the morning may be tolerated with nothing more

than a dirty look; that same exact stomp later in the day when old joints are beginning to ache after a hard play session may result in a dramatic growl and snarl demonstration. In our household, it's not uncommon to see a dog set a rule that NO DOG is to touch his bumper or even look at it. A few minutes later, the rules have changed and the bumper is anyone's for the taking.

Dogs check with each other often to see what the rules of that moment are: "Will you play with me now?" "Now can I share your bone?" They check with their human companions in the same way and for the same reason - they want something and are testing various avenues of getting it. Never hurts to ask. Sometimes again and again and again...

I pointed out that Buffy had asked - albeit rudely - for more space, and the Golden had willingly surrendered the space. No problem between the two dogs though obviously a problem for some of the human observers who failed to note that if the Golden had not been so invasive of Buffy's space in the first place, nothing would have happened! It was the Golden's repeated rudeness that irritated Buffy into making stricter and stricter rules. (That unsolicited or invasive displays are just as rude as an aggressive display is the topic of another article, "He Just Wants to Say Hi!")

The woman was only vaguely satisfied with my exploration of rules, agreements, confrontations and social interactions. She persisted, "Are you saying that if Buffy was in your classes and acted like that you wouldn't care?"

I would care. I would care that the relationship between Buffy and his owner was unhealthily skewed, resulting in boundaries being set by the dog, not the human. Fortunately, Buffy was a sweet, charming dog who - while possessed of a British Empire mentality (the sun never sets on my territory!) - was not interested in doing any damage to another dog.

Being a very bright dog and lacking any clear leadership from his handler, Buffy found himself in a world where the only real boundaries were the ones he set. That this did not always meet with complete approval from many of the dogs he encountered did not faze Buffy in any way. His confidence in himself remained largely unshaken.

Although punishment had been meted out by humans to "correct" his behavior, the punishment had been unsuccessful. The root problem had not been addressed: punished or not, Buffy still found no clear boundaries defined by his handler. He continued to set his own since more often than not, he got precisely what he wanted out of any given situation. Additionally, thanks to alert intervention by handlers of dogs Buffy had annoyed, Buffy rarely had had to face the unpleasant consequences of his actions. I suspect that given more off lead socialization with other dogs, Buffy would have soon been acting like a graduate of a charm school. Dogs are so very good at teaching other dogs.

When his handler did try (belatedly and ineffectively) to set boundaries, Buffy blew her off with complete disregard. His handler, in failing to provide clear leadership, had also man-



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aged to systematically undermine Buffy's respect for her. No one accepts boundaries set by someone they don't respect.

It is in so many little ways that we teach our dogs that we are not worthy of respect. When we indulgently allow them to act in inappropriate ways - even small ones - we often forget that we are simply providing our dogs with the proof that we are not good leaders. That is how they perceive our lenience, inconsistency and indulgence.

They don't think, "Ah, what a sweet owner I have. She must really love me." (No more than you think that a boss who lets you get away with murder and take 4 hour coffee breaks is a swell guy. You think he's a wimpy jerk, and you don't respect him.) The dog thinks, "Aha! Resources I value such as attention, food and toys are but a request away, and they're free!" In the world of dogs, he who controls the resources is to be respected. From your dog's point of view, if he can control the resources, he must be the boss.

Quite often, the dogs don't mind a great deal, since in non-crisis situations such indulgence often results in extra treats or attention or playtime. Depending on the dog's individual personality, poor leadership can be utterly harmless, creating at worst a pest who annoys all he meets. But it can become quite dangerous when the dog begins to change the rules and boundaries on more issues he considers important: people entering or leaving the house, being disturbed while resting or sleeping, being handled or restrained, other animals in his territory, etc.

If the owner does not have the dog's respect and has allowed the dog to exert leadership in small ways, there is NO way that dog will allow the owner to set the rules for more important issues.

**Consider this:** You have a friend who is sweet and generous but incapable of deciding on what movie to see or even what flavor Jell-o to whip up for the picnic. She dithers and blathers but is completely unable to act decisively on even the simplest issues. One day, aliens attempt to take over your town. You and your friend attend the emergency neighborhood meeting held to decide how best to deal with the alien threat. Your lives are at stake - this threat must be handled correctly. There's a call for nominations of people capable of acting in leadership roles. Do you nominate your friend? Of course not. You vote for someone who has proven leadership abilities.

And so do dogs. Owners who fail to set boundaries and provide clear leadership are often very surprised when in a "cri-

sis" situation (which could be as simple as the mailman walking up the path) their dog completely disregards any commands and acts on his own. Unfortunately, when acting on his own, a dog may feel the need to include dramatic (and effective) gestures that are at best just frightening, and potentially quite dangerous.

There is much to admire in a dog like Buffy. Most folks I know - myself included - would benefit from a healthy dose of his attitude: "If you want it, go for it." Life is too short to hem and haw and not follow your heart, assuming following your heart doesn't mean riding roughshod over other inhabitants of the planet. As a general rule, it's not considered sporting to take candy from a baby. (It should be noted that dogs like Buffy would probably ask the question, "Why not if they'll give it to you?" There is a logic in that response you can't deny.)

But there is an advantage to modifying impulses, and learning to ask nicely, and seeking compromise with others - you are welcome in more places, and often ultimately have greater freedom than the Buffys of this world.

Although the little dog thoroughly enjoyed training and obedience and learning, he was no longer welcome in any class. His activities were becoming quite limited, since outside of his own house and yard, Buffy was looked upon as a nuisance no one wanted to deal with. In allowing Buffy to set the boundaries in many areas, Buffy's owner inadvertently set a far crueler and larger boundary - one defined by his dog's rude behavior.

It is said that any journey, however long, consists of many small steps. This is also true of our relationships with our dogs. In sundry and even tedious ways, each interaction with our dogs tells them something about our leadership qualities. While we may flip in and out of different roles (employee, spouse, parent, dog owner), there is no "Off Duty" sign on our heads that indicate to the dog that our actions are off the record, not the actions of a leader of dogs, and should be paid no mind.

The dog believes that just as he does, we say what we mean, and that there's a valid communication and intent to all we do with and for them - 24 hours a day. When we forget that one of our major obligations to our dogs is to provide them with the leadership they need, we may found ourselves on the wrong side of a line in the sand - one drawn by the dog.

Hey, the dog figures, if you can't decide on a Jell-o flavor, you probably can't be trusted with dealing with the mailman.